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BENNETT INTRODUCES WEST DESERT LAND EXCHANGE BILL

Measure will increase fed's wilderness holdings, ease state's ability to generate funds for Utah schools

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senator Bob Bennett (R-Utah) today introduced legislation in the Senate authorizing a land exchange in Utah's West Desert which Bennett says will make management of federal wilderness parcels in the state more efficient, and development of state parcels for Utah schools more feasible.

"For too long, the school trust lands in the West Desert have been held captive by neighboring federal lands," Bennett said. "This checkerboard scenario has made these lands inaccessible to the state and prevents them from producing the much-needed, legally-required revenue for Utah's schools. This bill will reduce the state's holdings in federal wilderness study areas, and increase state ownership of lands which can finally deliver long-awaited economic benefit to its school children."

The Utah West Desert Land Exchange Act of 2000, cosponsored by Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), will authorize an "equal-value, equal-acreage" land exchange between the state of Utah and the federal government. Under the provisions of the bill, each party will exchange approximately 106,000 acres in the West Desert region of Utah. The federal government will receive state lands located within wilderness study areas; lands identified as having wilderness characteristics in the Bureau of Land Management's Utah Wilderness Inventory; and lands identified for acquisition in the Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan. The state of Utah will receive federal lands that are more suitable to carry out its mandate to generate revenue for Utah's public schools.

Bennett noted that the federal government will consolidate its ownership in the existing wilderness study areas which will allow for more consistent management.

Companion legislation, sponsored by Rep. James Hansen (R-Utah) has been the subject of hearings in the House of Representatives. The Hansen measure and the Bennett measure are endorsed by Utah Governor Mike Leavitt and the Clinton administration.

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<http://www.senate.gov/~bennett>